

Notation: A Wider Perspective

ASHOK D. RANADE

To consider notation in a wider perspective may lead to different kinds of studies in different contexts. For example, in a historical context, it may mean giving a chronological account of a particular notation system such as the Hindustani, Carnatic, etc. Another way of widening the perspective is to bring together a number of notation systems in order to compare and contrast them. Yet another possibility is to step beyond the field of music and discuss notation with reference to the entire family of performing arts. Finally, one may view the use of the concept in other sciences and disciplines such as mathematics, chemistry, geography, etc.

It may be deduced that the expanding ripples raised by the concept could only be the natural consequences of some fundamental process common to the areas mentioned. This is to suggest that an important wider perspective *vis-à-vis* notation is provided when the basic symbolizing process is brought under discussion. With some anticipation I would also suggest that quite a few of the controversies raging in India about notation in general are traceable to the reluctance to squarely face the issues raised by symbolization in music.

In its widest sense, a symbol is anything chosen to stand for, or represent, something else. Generally speaking, every notation system could be said to rely on a systematized group of symbols represented graphically to stand for structural and progressional musical elements. For example, musical aspects such as rhythm, pitch, scales, distribution of textual matter, etc. appear in notation systems because such aspects are structural in nature. On the other hand, most of the items pertaining to the tonal quality or progression of music during a certain span of time, etc. refer to elements related to music-making or musical development of ongoing processes. In this way notation tries to keep in view both aspects—the static as well as dynamic—of musical events dealt with notationally.

However, the most significant feature of any notating situation appears at a deeper level. To notate is to devise and establish visual structures to represent events that essentially take place in the realm of a non-visual sense modality. Hence to notate is to translate, or try to translate,

manifestations of a non-visual sense modality. In musical notation it is the aural mode which is subjected to the translation process. In dance notation, a similar approach is taken to deal with patterned physical movements.

An interesting side-issue deserves to be mentioned at this point. It would appear that written language also carries out a similar translation process. Language in its written forms consists of visual symbols devised and systematized in response to the original audio stimuli. The similarity in the basic processes is brought forward purposefully. How is it that the linguistic act of translation from the audio to the video mode has not attracted adverse comment? The origin of language and the origin of script have been considerably distanced from each other and the latter has inevitably followed the former. Scripts have been, of course, criticized for their phonetic inadequacy. But the essential utility of scripting as a process has not been questioned. On the other hand, musicians in India have reacted to the phenomenon of notation very strongly. Perhaps something more than a change of sense modality is involved! However, keeping the matter aside for future consideration, it would be helpful to note some objections to notation before proceeding further:

1. Indian music lays special emphasis on improvisation. Consequently, there is an ever-present theoretical possibility that no music can essentially be performed twice. Improvisation means music changes—and changes without warning! In view of this situation, notation would become merely a record of what has already taken place and has therefore been relegated to the past. Presentations of Indian music are true instances of the Heraclitan flux and of the aleatory principle—that is, the principle of chance. To notate Indian music is therefore to deny its unique trait of personality.

2. Advocates of notating systems have often argued that notation is merely to be employed in order to preserve authentic framework compositions. Both in intention and actuality notation is to be skeletal. However, the argument is of deceptive validity because in Indian music very little scope is afforded to the skeletal-composition framework. It is the elaboration of the musical ideas implied by the composition that forms the essence of Indian music. In the circumstances, the entire exercise of notating Indian music seems to have only marginal utility.

3. It must also be remembered that performances of Indian music depend a great deal on a live exchange of influences between the artist and the audience. In fact, through its responses to the artist the audience encourages him to strive for better musicianship even at the cost of deviating from the original plan of what to present and how. The point is that a written score and a tradition to depend on it is sure to cut off the live

interrelationship between the audience and the artist at the source. To say the least, this strikes at the roots of the Indian way of allowing music to flower into significant form.

4. One more likely result of notating has dubious value. Notation is bound to lead people to believe that it is *the* interpretation or *the* version of a composition or a rendering. Such a version would be stated to be the definitive edition of the work in question. Standardization brought about in such a manner is sure to sound the death knell of creativity.

5. Finally, to rely on notation for preservation of music is an act of anachronism when we have more and more devices with high-fidelity sound-recording at our disposal.

The stage is now set to discuss the process of symbolization which, as has been suggested earlier, is basic to notation and notational symbols. In all probability, a better comprehension of this fundamental process would make it necessary to review the entire situation. The procedure adopted is to state briefly the essential characteristics of symbolization as a process and to link each of them to notation.

1

To symbolize is essentially human. In fact, to be human is to symbolize. In other words, whatever human beings do, think and feel is covered by symbolism. Being so human an activity, it is inevitable that music is also subject to symbolization processes. Notation is therefore a by-product of the deeper symbolizing activity which music itself is.

However, it is to be remembered that musical symbolism is not confined to notation. I have argued elsewhere that musical symbolism is mainly to be perceived as musicological, musico-societal and, finally, as musico-psychological. Even though these symbolistic expressions are not mutually exclusive, a majority of symbolistic operations belong to either of the three varieties. Notational symbolism clearly belongs to the musicological category. Musicology, being a grammar of music, comes into existence as a post-event formulation. It is logical that its product, the notational system, should follow suit. This is the reason why all notation systems have a natal relationship with art music, even though musical symbolism as such is not confined to art music alone. When applied to other musical categories notation gains an extended scope of operation, but it does not undergo a conceptual change. Notation is a created symbolism and hence its intrinsic connections are with an equally deliberately created entity, the art of music.

The qualitative and quantitative shortcomings of notation are found to be the most in the case of non-art categories of music.

2

Symbolization takes place at various levels and consequently a symbolistic typology comes into being. Broadly classified, symbols are universal, cultural, and personal. This typology refers to the origin of symbols as well as to their range of application or validity. Another equally useful typology is based on a functional criterion. In this classification, symbols can be expressive or communicative. Depending on the mode of their origin, symbols are also classified as natural or created. It is clear that all such classifications put together bring home the many-sided operations of symbols.

Turning to notation, how can we characterize notational symbols? Are they universal, cultural, or personal? *Prima facie*, it seems that on the whole notational symbols consist of symbols of all three types. In this respect it is helpful to remember the controversies that have taken place regarding the universality of certain musical elements. Expectably, the considered opinion has been to be wary of any claim to universality and to stress the infinite diversity of human musical expression. However, our concern is confined to symbolistic typology with reference to the notational aspect and some valid generalizations seem possible:

a. Symbols that represent the basic characteristics of sound are universal. For example the highness or lowness of sound, or the proximity or separateness of individual sounds, find symbols that have near-universal validity. The cessation or the beginning of a musical activity would also claim a similar distinction.

b. Demarcation of internal musical divisions, subtler pitch variations, or such other musical particularities attract symbols of exclusive cultural validity.

c. Composers are known to have resorted to personalized symbol systems to indicate qualitative features of their music more directly. Timbre, the least standardized sound dimension, is also prone to attract personal symbols.

Some intrinsic connections are reflected in notational systems even where other useful symbolistic typologies are concerned. Understandably, personal symbols are more expressive than communicative while universal and

cultural symbols are more communicative.

The third classification also continues the trend of following selected interconnections. Consequently, universal notational symbols could be described as natural while the personal could be called 'created' symbols.

3

The most important feature of symbols is their infinite generative force. The primary motive for symbolization as an activity can be understood by reference to one of the basic tenets of Indian philosophy. This explains the birth and expansion of the universe occurring by the will of the supreme being which says: "I am one and I will be many." The individual human sensibility feels confined, cribbed and cabined on account of the limitations imposed by one's own person, society, medium of expression, or modality of exploring a medium. A keenly felt urge to go beyond oneself and so be enriched by experience otherwise available operates. The ambitious task is carried out through symbolic objects, procedures, and processes with varying frequencies and intensities. It is against this background that symbols are described as entities which tend to represent rather than present. Symbols thus extend the area of influence and expand the range of experience at the same time.

In this context the following notational features attract notice:

- a. To notate is to move away from an individual performance and to ready the musical material for potential performing or non-performing musical events. It is also to dissociate music from a particular performer and to make it accessible to many.
- b. Notational systems seem to make an in-built provision for interpretation. Portions, passages, and movements are loosely notated to give the performer a choice.

4

Symbolization has two other features very closely connected with the matter of motivation. They are mentioned separately because of their far-reaching consequences.

Symbolization operates through inversion of the fundamental experiential dimensions of time and space as also through compulsive, mutual, and supportive functions of the audio and video sense modalities.

Symbolization tends to create a perceptual dimensional mirror. If the actual experiential activity is conducted on the temporal plane, the symbolization takes place on the spatial plane, and *vice versa*. Similarly, if the primary experience is in the audio mode, symbolization takes place in the video mode—though the reverse is not true. The entire question of which modality is best suited to the primary and actual act of experiencing is a matter of choice, but once the choice is made, the sense modality in which symbolization takes place becomes very nearly predetermined. It is very inefficient, and hence rare, to have the primary activity as well as the symbolization in the same mode.

To turn to notation is to immediately sense the conversion of musical temporality into a deliberate notational spatiality. All time values in music become space values in notation. All audio experience is turned into video representation. By virtue of its being spatial and visual, notation responds to the basic human desire to perceive bidimensionally. We are inclined to isolate dimensions and modalities for the sake of art, but the compulsions of nature or life make us allocate at least minimal roles to the ignored dimensions and modalities. It is significant that of the five musical categories art music, the most non-visual of them all, concerns itself with notation maximally. A corroborative evidence is that non-art musics suffer more if presented through the audio mode alone while art music thrives on such a situation.

5

A number of symbolistic operations appear less mysterious if it is remembered that a very real human quality is synesthesia. The phenomenon of transferred sensation has a significant part to play in the symbolizing activity. In the present context it is necessary to know that synesthesia does not enjoy an unlimited sensory mobility. There are synthetic pairs of senses for transfer of the sensations in question. The senses of sound and sight are a major pair.

As far as notating is concerned, I would venture to put forward a hypothesis: The shapes and figurations of notational symbols indicate that they are the results of the synesthetic relationship between sound and movement translated graphically. Sounds, when produced and heard, give rise to body movements and gestures. The latter are subsequently translated into visual presentations on which notation systems rely for the basic itemization.

6

Symbolization brings forth relationships between two or more entities otherwise enjoying an independent existence. Understood thus, one of the two referents in musical symbolism can be identified as extra-musical. Thus there are instances of musical symbolism in which music stands for social hierarchy, seasonal cycles, various phases in human life, etc.

The extra-art connections of musical symbolism play an important part in bestowing significance on music. In this context it is easily seen that art music, by its deliberate concentration on the temporal, audio, etc., has very limited scope for extra-musical symbolism and the significance derived from it. Consequently the symbolizing proclivities are forced to operate in a narrow channel—that of notation. Through it musical symbolism tries to gain advantages accrued from extra-musical symbolism in other categories.

7

Finally, symbolization is characterized by its reliance on a medium possessing the following qualities:

- a. Divisibility—the capacity of the medium to allow subdivisions according to the symbolic requirements.
- b. Ambiguity—an innate capacity to suggest a variety of meanings. To put it negatively, the medium must reject firm lexicographic pinning down.

A look at various notational systems shows that visual symbols are easy to alter, modify, or cancel. Further, the notational components lack strong lexical content in themselves.

Notation has a technical aspect and that has been frequently discussed with favour and fervour. However, it is submitted that the deeper issues of connections between symbolizing propensities, on the one hand, and of the special correlation between audio and video sense modalities need more attention. □